

# I'LL RAISE YOU SIX GRANNY SMITHS

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You have a glut of lemons and family and friends plead 'No more!'. Wild parsley is pushing up your pavers. Your signature banana cake recipe deserves wider public recognition. You have heaps of seed saved from last year's best chilies. If any of these situations could apply to you, perhaps what you need is a neighbourhood food swap.

Of course food swapping is hardly a new phenomenon. Home gardeners have always exchanged produce or given it away. It is not unusual for community or church events to include swapping of food along with other items like toys or books. And community gardeners regularly share produce.

What is new is the emergence of events designed specifically for food exchange, where no money changes hands, which are organized by people with food security, public health and community building in mind. And although it is not exclusive to Australia, we are certainly in the vanguard of this exciting new movement.

As the phenomenon is in its infancy it is not easy to obtain comprehensive figures about the level of activity. There are no official, dedicated national or international newsletters as yet, and no central bodies registering food swaps or collecting statistics. But we can glean some information.

When Peta Christense, a Melbourne community gardens support worker, who received a Churchill Fellowship to travel widely overseas to study developments in urban agriculture, compiled her comprehensive report in 2005, she made no mention of food swaps. It seems reasonable to conclude that they were rarities overseas back then. And even today, googling 'food swaps' nets a very meagre haul - a few scattered meetings throughout the USA, Canada and the UK.

Here in Australia, food swapping appears to have originated in a project called the Urban Orchard established in 2004 at Melbourne's Centre for Education and Research in Environmental Strategies (CERES). The project initially focused on utilising the surplus backyard fruit that resulted from the abundant plantings of the Mediterranean post-war migrants across the inner- northern suburbs of Melbourne.

Since then, food swapping at Ceres has extended to include vegetables, herbs, seedlings and seeds. Participants from over 180 local households, representing a mix of age groups and cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, can now exchange produce every single Saturday morning. Glenda Lindsay, who two years ago was one of the founders of the Yarra Urban Harvest in Fitzroy, cites the 'swap table' at Ceres as a major inspiration.

Ceres Urban Orchard has compiled a national list of food swaps. There are currently four in South Australia - three in Adelaide and one in Gawler. New South Wales has one in Wollongong, and in Queensland, Brighton is also a host. Rural Victoria is represented by Sale, but Melbourne is clearly the epicenter with eight different food exchanges per month.

There has even been some mainstream recognition recently. On 13 March, Ceres, Yarra Neighbourhood Orchard and Cultivating Community co-hosted 'The World's Biggest Eva Vegie Swap' in the city square as part of Melbourne's Food and Wine Festival.

The swap stimulated a great deal of media and public interest and over 300 people participated, some of whom were keen to start food exchanges in their own neighbourhoods. Passers-by seemed intrigued by the whole notion of food for free, the most common question being: 'How do I know what's a fair exchange for what I bring?'

I have been involved for some time now with Yarra Urban Harvest, which every month attracts anywhere between thirty and sixty food swap participants.

Because the Yarra swap vegies are invariably freshly picked, they taste like no other. Diversity is also a hallmark, featuring heritage crops and unusual plants adapted to local conditions. Even macadamia nuts made an appearance recently, which was extraordinary for inner-city Melbourne. And because storage and refrigeration are not an issue, items like zucchini flowers and nasturtium leaves that have no 'shelf life' are also regular offerings.

There are seasonal variations as to how much produce participants contribute, but at one memorable swap last year at the height of summer more than 90 kilos of food changed hands.

Sharing of gardening and food lore is one of the other drawcards. Recently, I was selecting some kumquats for marmalade, when I was alerted by a Chinese neighbour to the benefits of salted kumquats for relieving sore throats. Another neighbour, recently returned from Northern India, had been introduced there to kumquat chutney, flavoured with staranise, ginger, chillies and limejuice. The swaps are also full of camaraderie, especially as people tend to undervalue what they produce themselves and often have to be pressed to take more home.

But food swaps are not only about improving your diet or becoming part of a like-minded community of food enthusiasts. Nor are they just about being frugal, minimizing food miles, reducing waste or even having fun. Food swaps are, quite simply, signposts to the future.

As Jennifer Alden, CEO of Cultivating Community puts it: 'Neighbourhood Vegie swaps are a part of an emerging Alternative Food Economy, a larger community food system. As the impacts of climate change and peak oil become more extreme it's things like growing our own veggies, sharing resources within our communities and generally relocalising that are going to ensure a resilient and food secure future.'

Concern about food security and equity undoubtedly informed the decision of Melbourne's Maribyrnong council to support the Western Urban Harvest Swap that meets monthly in the suburb of Footscray. According to statistics provided by the local Western Region Health Centre, two-thirds of Maribyrnong is a 'food desert', with inadequate access to fresh fruit and vegetables.

As part of its five-year plan to rectify the situation, the local council has devised a Vic Health-funded 'Fruit and Veg for All' campaign, to which food exchanges are integral. As then Mayor Michelle MacDonald exhorted prior to the launch of the swap eighteen months ago: 'If you've got more olives than you need and more broccoli than you can cook or too many veggies ripening at the same time, come along and share your harvest.'

Maybe for you there is something wrong with this picture. Perhaps you don't know the first thing about gardening. If that's the case, don't despair. There are plenty of resources out there to get you started, and plants are very forgiving. In pots, window boxes and on balconies, vertically, in the shade or even in the dark – they can flourish in the unlikeliest circumstances. And of course at food exchanges, small contributions are always welcome; the beauty of seeds is that they grow into something bigger.

At the city square swap two unrelated contributors turned up with grapes called American Strawberry. One variety was black, soft, fragrant and tasted like it was about to spontaneously ferment into wine. The other was paler, crisp and refreshing, with a strong under taste of strawberry.

Clearly different soil types, cultivation methods and solar aspects had had a huge impact. Who needs Bordeaux, Marlborough and the Barossa when we can taste marked regional differences within a mere eight inner-city kilometers? So - grab those lemons and get down to your local food swap. If you don't have one yet, I'm sure it's just a matter of time.

